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Clues to neverending interpretations

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The work of Milan Chabera is infused with metaphysical motives. It is dominated by poetically titled creations that link back to the tradition of abstraction, yet amongst the many canvases we also find such that capture the everyday banal situations. The motive of cities is regularly present in Chabera's paintings. His masterfully composed permanently expanding and multiplying labyrinths of urban palimpsests are not just the sign of supposed ground plans of forms, but they are the products of harmonic collaboration between spontaneous perceptions and selective memory recordings. The canvases of Milan Chabera – brilliantly arranged through the balancing of intuition and memory – provide clues to neverending interpretations. They are driven by an implicitly present order that rises from constellations of expressive silhouettes and richly coloured forms. They resemble shards of reality put together into layerings of images. The rich spectrum of colour and contrasting use of cold and warm tones do often assume a perspective function. Impulsive outflows of alchemically mixed paints exploding onto the surface of the canvas are resolutely subjected by strict and bold outlines. Lines of precisely controlled forms are stretching themselves across the canvases like circus ropes tensioned between clean abstraction and the sediment of realism, they are balancing above the depth of the primal amorphous chaos, which demands the author's taming gesture. No sign of an uncertain stumble.

Milan Chabera is not a purely idealistic artist neglecting the material reality of today's society. He clearly realizes the need to overthrow the self-destructing illusion of the non-commercial that plagues the art scene of today. With determination he wants to promote open acceptance of commercial value of art in general. That also leads him to present his works under his own brand that is composed of two key elements: the signature and the logo stamp. The combination of a hand signature and a typographical brand logo symbolizes the connection of an artist creating his own original works and an audience of collectors looking for investment into art that has the level of quality. Just a handful of contemporary Czech artists can pride themselves on such a high standard of artistic work and such unity of recognizable signature as Milan Chabera.

Some time ago you said that you don't like interviews as you are not looking for too much of an academic perspective on your works.

That is true. People often ask me to reflect on my paintings, but I don't like to explain why I did this or that line or why red is the dominant colour here. The painting is a product of the moment and all that happens is there because I want it and feel it like that in that moment. Once I know I am done the painting is sorted for me and I don't come back to it anymore.

Is there some original theoretical concept behind your work? Do you believe in intuitive creation or are you into systematic composition on canvas?

Some artists work with a solid concept from the beginning, while I see the painting arise directly from the process of creating. I create on impulse following my immediate state of mind and I record these immediate creations into notebooks where they serve as my future material to work on large compositions. I always leave enough room for accidental outcomes, but even the unexpected still has to fit the resulting composition. In a way I am self-inspired by working with colours and forms. I have periods where I tune into a certain colour spectrum and I ignore the others for that time. You can't really explain my choices of colours, it is all happening very

spontaneously for me. I also never work on one painting. Most of the time I work on three to five works at the same time. It comes from me working in two studios where I produce collections or series of works usually upto 15 pieces. When I complete such a collection it usually moves into another space so it does not draw my attention and I can work on something else. The moment when I conclude a series is very important to me. It is usually a special moment that shifts my mind and I can leave it behind and move onto something else, creating something new.

You said that your spontaneous ideas get recorded into sketch notebooks and that you use these as an inspiration source later on. How much of the final works is in these sketches?

I like the process of grabbing spontaneous ideas and recording them down into notebooks. Very often it is the first thing I do in my work day. What I don't do is simply enlarge sketches to do the big canvases. Many people work like that but I don't believe in it. It is not an interesting process as it just revolves around copying yourself. In that I see a removal of the creative spontaneity and discovery.

Very often you are being called an artist expanding on the expressionist tradition, new figuration and cubism. Radan Wagner finds many influences of the notorious "Skupina 42". Do you feel like you continue in these traditions?

I don't have a problem with such comparisons. I am often linked to Picasso. There is some analogy there as I was very influenced by his charcoal and pastel drawings which are characterized by their clear solid forms. I feel very close to Skupina 42 too, professor Jan Smetana was my favorite painter. He was a great person and a great teacher.

If we bracket down all your possible influences are there any specific artistic role models that you followed throughout your career?

I don't really have a single role model for my work, but I do enjoy various artists from different eras. Just to name a few: Piero della Francesca, Giotto di Bondone, Diego Vélasquez, El Greco, Francisco Goya, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Francis Bacon, Marino Marini, Giorgio Morandi, skupina CoBrA, Kees van Dongen, Robert Rauschenberg. From czech artists I would list Emil Filla, Karel Černý and Skupina 42.

In the summer of 2015 we saw the thematic exhibition in Constanz commemorating the 600th anniversary of Jan Hus for which you did a special painting. Are you often following specific subjects in your work or is it the Jan Hus story that interests you personally?

Jan Hus is an incredibly strong theme, it was a big challenge for me. Sometimes I follow a theme in my painting, but I am very selective about that. Painting "The end of a big hope" was a very tough task for me.

Your work is dominated by figurative portrait painting. The figures are often very abstract and their lines reduced to outlines or silhouettes. Even though they maintain a connection to reality. Are you more interested in the figure as a form or are you inspired by the real people?

The figure as an abstract form is often not enough for me in the painting so I am always looking at real people who I let enter into my paintings. The result of such a process is not necessarily a specific portrait of someone real. Most often I operate between abstraction and reality and I put forward the mixture of momentary inspiration and memory. I combine formal aspects with really purely human things and all of that is filtered through the play of fantasy where I move things to the edge of legibility in order to invite a broad array of possible interpretations. I am very happy when people discover new things in my works every time they encounter them even after years of having owned a painting.

Clearly your choice is most often for large format paintings and recently you are also duplicating or multiplying motives on your paintings. Are you perhaps inspired by the pop-art tendency to recreate the same motive with some variations?

My favorite format is the square but sometimes I see the composition escape the square so I add another canvas to it. This creates these composed large format works. I can't really explain it well but multiplying the painting space in canvas triggers my creativity with the right impulses to convey powerful messages.

Red seems to be your very favourite colour in your painting. Is it really your number one colour?

Red is my truly favourite colour, but it is not just any kind of red. I see the paints and colours as part of the character and signature of an artist. I never reveal what my own red is actually composed of technologically. It is my secret as the author.

The colour palette of your works is generally very intense, bold and characterstic, full of rich colour. What is the reason for this?

My colour perception has been formed through my journeys around the world. I always had a thing for intense full colour, especially red, black and white. I often use plate gold in bigger surfaces as it creates a contrast to the colours and it elevates the effect of the painting. The richness of tones is created through special layering of techniques. I don't use temperas very often, I prefer acrylic and oil instead.

Do you really mix your paints yourself?

Yes I do mix my own paints because I tremendously enjoy it and I think there is no other better way.

As we said your central line of work is within figurative subjects. But what is your relationship to landscape painting?

Six years ago my son studied in Amsterdam at the Academy. We often came for a visit with my wife. Holland caught our eye with its specific landscape full of flat green land and many canals. We rented a small studio there and there I did a series of five dutch landscapes. That was the last time I was tempted to do just landscape work. I had an intense landscape period in my younger years as most artists do, but that is not so essential to me now.

Did you ever think about ways to further educate your audience and give rise to new future collectors of your works?

That is a complex problem indeed. It is an uncertain struggle that nobody really wants to take on. The art world today is often moved by people with a purely economical mindset and background. There is no depth to their interest in art apart from its potential as an investment with a value rise. On the other hand the office space is increasingly more cultivated and part of that is the increase in artwork based designs of interiors. I find that a great way to bring people to art and it is a very valuable work for the art world.

How do you explain the general long-term drop of interest in art in the czech society?

It is sad to see how many people consider art unnecessary today or who see it as a side addition. They are more motivated to spend the same money on a large tv. My work is most often bought by people who are not really in financial difficulty, but it is great to see more and more people who want to live with good art so much that they are able to sacrifice some material well-being even when it is difficult for them.

Are you an art collector yourself?

I am not really a collector, but if something moves me and I can afford it I gladly buy it.

In contemporary art new media are progressively pushing classic techniques aside. Seeing this situation what is the future of painting as such?

I believe that classic painting techniques and new media can and will coexist. The direct and immediate expression of painting is irreplaceable – even if only due to ease of obtaining the equipment – and it will live on as long as there are people who will desire to create.

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